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ABSTRACT

In spite of a number of unanswered questions regarding its place in the teaching of composition and the lack of agreement on why it is effective, sentence combining (SC) has become accepted as a useful skill building technique in regular composition classes. Attempting a broader context or the college level, SC was used exclusively to teach every aspect of composition to an experimental group of 150 students. The classes provided daily practice in putting sentences together in context and offered class discussion on the reasons for the students' syntactic and rhetorical decisions. Using SC, the students covered the basic principles of rhetoric and style as well as many of the problems of grammar, punctuation, and diction. Since the results of the course indicated significant gains for the students in all areas of composition as compared with a conventionally taught group, the process of SC raises the following possibilities for college composition classes: make sentence combining a total curriculum; permit the expansion of given patterns by the addition of new content in the exercises, thereby leading the student toward free writing; allow students to create their own "kernels" and exercises; and consider SC as a mechanism for organizing ideas within the larger units of discourse. (HAI)

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Beyond Sentence-Level Combining: Options in the Rhetorical Context*

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Sentence combining (SC) has come a long way. It was only 13 years ago that Kellogg Hunt first suggested the use of "recursive 'sentence-combining transformations'" to increase students' syntactic maturity, to widen, as he put it, their "span of grammatical attention and concern." Since then, SC has become a household word in the profession. To be sure, the idea of combining little sentences into bigger ones wasn't new even back in 1965; as Stephen Sherwin has pointed out, traditional grammars often included such exercises, and many old-timers in high school and college English departments across the country would no doubt claim to have used SC in their composition classes long before the practice had a name. Nor is SC apparently an American invention; Frank O'Hare recalls combining sentences as a high school senior in his native Scotland, and in rummaging through some old school notebooks in the attic during a recent visit to Hungary, where I grew up, I ran across sentence-building exercises that were precisely what we would now call exercises in SC. The fact that such exercises have been used so long and so widely--perhaps much more extensively than many of us are aware--shouldn't surprise us: there is probably not a more fundamental single truth about writing than that it is the process of putting sentences together. Hunt's lasting contribution was that he captured and capitalized on this truth by placing the idea of SC into the context of a powerful formal model of grammar, while at the same time he was able to quantify, especially by inventing the T-unit, the very ability that he claimed SC could enhance. That now there was a set of

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objective criteria which many people could accept as a reliable measure of at least some components of writing skill, was especially instrumental in generating subsequent research interest in school-age syntactic development.

There is no need to document here in detail the remarkable success of the SC method, or to review the impressive series of research studies within the past decade that have produced evidence in support of Hunt's thesis. Instead, let me risk a few generalizations that can be extracted from this research:

First, and most obviously, although with some variations in the magnitude of achieved gains, study after study has found SC practice to result in significant growth in syntactic maturity beyond the maturity level characteristic of the age or grade involved (as measured by Hunt's factors);

Second, the effectiveness of SC is not bound to the student's training in formal grammar; that is, by and large SC practice utilizes and builds upon a transformational apparatus given by the student's knowledge of the spoken language;

Third, at least to some extent, the effects of SC treatment are retained beyond the period of intensive training (although retention rates are poorly understood);

Fourth, the effectiveness of SC is not bound to the student's age or level of mental-intellectual development;

And fifth, and perhaps most crucially, syntactic maturity gains seem to correlate with significant improvement in the overall quality of student writing; that is, increased facility in handling syntax apparently somehow transfers into the student's own free writing and even helps generate new ideas.

It was probably this last finding--that the effects of SC practice show up in the writing quality--that first directed serious attention to SC as a legitimate and effective component of the composition class. It seemed to make a lot of sense that students who had broadened their repertoire of syntactic options through SC exercises would find it easier to express themselves, to "find the right words," when writing on their own. At the same time it wasn't clear--and still isn't--what it is about SC that really does the job. In order to integrate SC into a composition program and expect it to work, you have to know where its effectiveness lies, what features of it you cannot dispense with without destroying whatever makes it tick, as opposed to its marginal and therefore dispensible or alterable components. Does SC work because it focuses on the sentence--a unit long enough to serve somehow as the "basic unit of thought," but short enough to be within the range of our short-term memory capacity? Does it work because it assumes the content of the exercise-material to be given, so that students can concentrate their energies and attention on manipulating syntactic form alone? If so, would the addition of new content in the process of combining destroy the basic rationale? Is it the intensity of the practice that is crucial--its frequency or duration, the time span involved, or perhaps the total amount of time spent on the exercises? Past SC programs have varied widely in this regard. Then, how important is oral practice--or more precisely, the combined sensory experience of seeing, hearing, pronouncing, and writing the same sentences? What about the psychological side--is the method effective primarily because it makes students feel good, giving them a kind of power or control over language? Is it that students enjoy the problem-solving character of SC, and like to puzzle out which of the several options available to them in a given exercise is the best? Or is SC simply a fancy way of referring to controlled

writing? Which of these questions are decisive and which are trivial? Although each of us no doubt have our preferred hunches--in some cases on the basis of extensive teaching experience with the approach--it seems that scientifically controlled research has hardly made a dent in our theoretical ignorance about these matters.

But perhaps more bothersome than these (for now unanswerable) questions--at least from the point of view of the teaching of composition--is the apparent lack, at this stage of our understanding of what's going on, of a more direct link between, on the one hand, exercises calling for the transformational combining of simple sentences into more complex ones, and on the other, the task of creating meaning and of expressing it in the form of rhetorically satisfactory paragraphs and essays. This latter is of course commonly thought to be the central task of a composition program. Now, to my mind, the really nagging question, one that so far SC research (with some notable exceptions) has generally bypassed, is whether conceiving, and realizing in proper form, a paragraph-ful of content necessarily implies a level of organization beyond the limits to which SC as a methodological principle is inherently capable of being extended. Put more simply, but perhaps not quite equivalently: is SC bound to be relegated, because of supposed inherent limitations, to the status of an adjunct in the composition class?

In a recent article published in the English Journal, one of the best written and most persuasive arguments for SC that I know of, William Strong says the following:

> The most appropriate context for SC, as far as I am concerned, is as a skill-building adjunct to regular composition work. In no sense, then, is SC a comprehensive writing program in and of itself. It can be a part of a well-articulated

program, but common sense suggests that it can't be the one and only instructional strategy. That would be sheer lunacy. It would destroy the basic rationale and usefulness of the approach . . . My purpose in quoting this passage from Strong is not that I disagree and therefore want to argue with him. This statement expresses a common sentiment. Given the prevalent notion of SC, Strong is perfectly correct: it would be utterly ridiculous--indeed sheer lunacy--to build an entire writing program around exercises of the sort which ask students to reduce one of two given sentences to a <u>that</u>-clause or a participial phrase or a noun substitute totally out of context, as in the usual "grammatically signalled" exercises, or even to work only with "open" SC exercises, which, while providing a broader context, still normally involve only the manipulation of predetermined chunks of content and generally disallow semantic expansion. (I realize, of course, that not all teachers religiously follow this principle.) There is then no disagreement that SC so conceived cannot constitute a writing program in and of itself.

The question is whether SC <u>ought</u> to be so conceived. Do we need to assume that SC on the one hand and rhetorically motivated free writing on the other are polar practices on the spectrum of activities in the composition class? Are they really too far apart in their goals to have a meaningful point of contact and perhaps even a shared range where they are integrated with each other and where whatever skills SC can give the student become truly useful, perhaps indispensable? I suggest that in view of the enormous potential feasibility of this approach, we should not be satisfied with such a limited view.

For one thing, the adjunct theory of SC is flatly contradicted by extensive experimental classroom experience with the method--or, more precisely, with the application of an extended and perhaps refined version of the SC-

concept--at Miami University. It is likely that the different educational needs of students in a college freshman composition class and those in, say, a junior-high language arts class require different criteria for evaluating what SC can and cannot do for the students. But here we are concerned especially with college-level composition, and I am referring to, and making claims for, the use of SC on this level. In an experimental study that Donald Daiker, Max Morenberg, and I conducted last year, we had our entire experimental group (about 150 students) taught composition--everything about composition--exclusively through SC. No formal rhetorics, no readers, no grammars--only active, daily practice in putting sentences together in context, and active daily discussion in class of the reasons for the students' syntactic and rhetorical decisions. Apparently there was nothing that needed to be said about writing (and is normally covered more systematically but also more abstractly and generally out of context in a regular syllabus) that the SC classes could not deal with on the spot, as the questions arose, in the context of synthesizing sentences into paragraphs and essays. While combining sentences, within a 15-week semester experimental students covered basic principles of rhetoric and style--thesis, organization, coherence, emphasis, rhythm, and tone, as well as many problems of grammar and punctuation as they arose, even questions of diction. But the emphasis was always on sentences and their relationships in context. What all this added up to were significant gains on all fronts as compared to those achieved by the conventionally taught reference group --whopping gains in clause length and T-unit length, and what's more important, corresponding significant gains in the quality of writing by all the measures we used. We have reported on detailed results of this experiment elsewhere (for a partial report, see CCC xxix.1.36-41), and I need not dwell on them here. The point is, if SC works in the capacity of

a total curriculum in composition--and works far better than the conventional syllabus--why keep it as an adjunct?

Secondly, since no one knows for sure what makes SC so effective, no one knows for sure whether the practice of keeping the objective meaning strictly variable in the combining process reflects an essential ingredient of the method or instead a marginal and therefore dispensible one. It is worth recalling that this practice, which is especially relevant to grammatically signalled SC exercises, can be traced back directly to a basic claim of early transformational theory--of which, let us remember, modern SC was an offshoot--namely, that grammatical transformations were not supposed to change meaning. Are we bound by and committed to this principle (a principle which, incidentally, many linguists no longer hold)? Were we to violate the underlying rationale of the method if we allowed and encouraged students, in appropriately constructed and still controlled exercises, to expand given patterns by the addition of new content--a procedure that is central to Christensen's approach, for example? By partly providing but partly inviting and soliciting the content, we could of course bridge some of the gap toward free writing. But where do we stop? Where should we? When do we cease doing SC and ease into doing something else--real, creative writing, which is of course our ultimate goal to teach?

Or, moving even more toward invention, consider the kind of exercise that asks students to create their own "kernels" from the beginning--perhaps, at first, in the form of random notes, half-sentences, bits of information. In the center of even such a seemingly conventional exercise there is always, invariably, the sentence; when asked to extract and formulate a central idea out of the random notes, to select relevant details to support that idea, to arrange the selected details into a coherent sequence, to combine and rearrange some of the sentences in order to signal the appropriate

subordinate and superordinate rank relationships and to assure the proper distribution of emphasis or to create a smooth rhythmic flow through the paragraph--inevitably, at every turn, the student confronts--and indeed combines--sentences. Here again we are down to genuine, real writing; but are we still within the "legitimate" range of SC? Or are we beyond it?

I guess what I am suggesting once again is that perhaps, everything said and considered, the writer's most direct experience in the process of writing is that of putting sentences together. So, in principle, writing is impossible without combining sentences. Notice that I didn't say "writing was impossible without 'SC'." Because the term "SC" has acquired a specialized meaning, at the moment it is not synonymous with "combining sentences" in the broader sense that I have just suggested. But is there any reason why it couldn't be--or at least why we couldn't work toward such a synonymy? Isn't the only main obstacle to considering SC as a mechanism for organizing ideas within larger units of discourse the fact that we haven't thought of it that way, and therefore haven't tried to devise appropriate exercises in which the effects of given transformations would serve rhetorical ends, such as emphasis and coherence? Perhaps, as a first step, we should find another term to replace "SC," because by now we have come a long way from what this term still suggests to many people. The term is generally associated with two common types of SC exercises: "open" and "grammatically signalled." But there are other possibilities. For example, in contextually signalled exercises the specific transformations to be applied to a set of kernels placed (and set off) within a paragraph are motivated by the syntactically expressed rhetorical commitment made in the preceding (invariant) context. The output of the transformations is, then, part of the response to that commitment, in the sense of the terms suggested by Robert Gorrell. Or consider the potential transformational triggering

effects of the principles that govern the proper sequencing of old and new information within a sentence--principles that play an important part in Wallace Chafe's theory of structural semantics. What motivates the combining in such an exercise is the incoherence or misplaced emphasis resulting from the failure of the combining to take place. Being guided through such exercises to the proper choice among available combining options within a paragraphic context can sharpen the students' sense of the cohesion, organization, and progression of ideas and refine their ability to rank ideas according to their intended import. Similar exercises have been suggested in the past--by Henry Gleason, for example, in his book Linguistics and English Grammar--but have never taken hold within the very methodology where they most appropriately belong.

As Strong and others have so convincingly demonstrated, SC has taken us not only back to the real basics of writing but far beyond them. We are now once again at a new threshold, as SC appears to be gaining ground in college and high school composition classes, its increasing popularity shown for example, by the number of new SC texts in the making, and by the prospect of the first major conference on "SC and the Teaching of Writing," to be held at Miami University in October. We are now once again challenged to go beyond, to try to find--and then find a way to teach--the link between how little sentences grow into big ones--and how little paragraphs grow into big ones.